



Saint Francis de Sales

Doctor of the Church

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COVER ART:

“The Virgin Appears to Saint Francis de Sales” by Carlo Maratta (1625 – 1713).
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(1567 – 1622)

In the second half of the 16th century, Francis de Sales, Lord of Nouvelles, a descendant of the ancient family of de Sales, lived at Château de Sales in the parish of Thorens, Duchy of Savoy. He married Frances de Sionnas, only daughter and sole heiress of Melchior de Sionnas, Lord of Vallières of La Thuille and of de Boisy, one of the oldest and best families in Savoy. She brought the estates of Boisy with her as her dowry on condition that her husband, Francis de Sales, should take the name of de Boisy. Thus, it will therefore be as Monsieur and Madame de Boisy that the parents of Saint Francis de Sales will be known in the following pages.

Madame de Boisy's first son, Francis de Sales, the future saint, Doctor of the Church, and Prince Bishop of Geneva, was born on 21 August 1567. God and man alike looked upon him with exceeding love. One of his biographers wrote, "This Saint is not yet fully revealed to us but already his name is inexpressibly dear to the countless souls who have turned to him and his teaching as a never-failing source of strength and sweetness." Every saint seems to have a mission to reproduce in his life a special trait or characteristic in the life of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For instance, Saint Francis of Assisi was called to a great love of poverty, Saint Vincent de Paul to humility, and so on regarding the different virtues of different saints. Saint Francis de Sales' special trait was his spirit of meekness and gentleness, the fulfillment of Our Lord's teaching: *Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart* (Matt xi, 29) and *Blessed are the meek for they shall possess the land* (Matt v, 4). It was this heavenly virtue that gave Saint Francis such charm and that enabled him to attract and win souls so wonderfully to God.

Francis had the immense advantage of a good Catholic home. His father, without any claim to great sanctity, was an upright Christian gentleman with a high standard of honor. From the earliest dawn of his intelligence, he learned from his mother a tender love of God and God's poor. He was an apt and ready pupil. He delighted in giving alms to the poor, and not only money, of which after all a small child hardly knows the value, but delicate tidbits from his own table.

When he was seven, he was sent to the college of La Roche. After school was finished, he used to lead as many of his companions as would follow him to the nearest church to pray before the Blessed Sacrament and to walk in procession (how childlike!) around the font.

However, he was a thorough boy, full of vitality and even sometimes mischievous. He knew his way to the kitchen and to the heart of the cook! He delighted in manly sports, riding, dancing, and fencing, and therefore gained not only strength and vigor but also the dignity and grace of movement that was so conspicuous in later life.

After two years at La Roche, he spent four more in the college at Annecy. It soon became clear that he was a lad of brilliant intellect joined to a tremendous capacity for work. Already, too, he seemed to have that unconscious power of attraction that was more marked in his later years. Looking upon him, people felt drawn to God, just as in time to come, they would say, "If Monsieur de Genève is so good, how wonderful must be the goodness of God." His father confessed to his mother that when he looked upon his son, he felt a desire to be a better man.

The chief events of these years at Annecy were his First Communion and his receiving the tonsure. The latter ceremony was considered by many in that age to be of little significance, but to Francis it was an act of the deepest meaning. It was the first step towards the complete dedication of himself to God and, with all his heart, he uttered the sacred words, "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance."

UNIVERSITY LIFE, PARIS, AND PADUA (1580 - 1591)

From Annecy, Francis was sent to the University of Paris. He implored his father not to send him to the college of Navarre, whither most of the Savoyard nobles resorted, but to the newly established Jesuit college, saying with the deepest humility that he might not have the same strength as others to resist temptation. His request was granted, and he was sent to study under the Jesuits. Monsieur Déage, a good but narrow-minded man, was appointed his tutor. At Paris, Francis completed his rhetoric and philosophy, with the highest distinction, studying also theology, Scripture and Hebrew, and perfecting himself by his father's command in all the exercises of a young noble.

Every day Francis made an hour's mental prayer, read a considerable portion of some spiritual book, which he carried about with him, and made a visit to some sanctuary of the Blessed Virgin. He frequented the Holy Table, saying that he went to his Divine Master to learn the science of the saints, as he did to his earthly masters for secular instruction. He chose religious for his friends and selected monasteries for recreational visits. "We think so little of our salvation," he used to say, "and these holy men think of nothing else!" He fasted and wore a hair shirt three days in the week, and was ever distinguished for chastity, the chosen virtue of the client of Mary and the sanctuary. "At Paris," he said later, "I greatly longed to be holy and perfect and studied to obtain humility and gentleness with great fervor." It seems that Monsieur Déage furnished the

humble youth with many opportunities. Monsieur Déage was strict and irritable and did not hesitate to box his pupil's ears when Francis, according to his wont, let himself be thought guilty of what was really the fault of others.

It was towards the end of his six years in Paris, when Francis was seventeen, that he suffered a dreadful trial that perhaps marks in his life the transition from extraordinary to heroic sanctity. He felt it was impossible for him to be saved. All his struggles, all his prayers, his study on the grounds of hope, and his studies on the doctrine of predestination were of no use. His strength was actually wearing away and his soul was shadowed by the darkest melancholy. All he could do was continue his exercises of piety and virtue, while he constantly uttered words of resignation to God saying, "Ah, Lord, if I am never to see Thee or Thy Blessed Mother in the next world, suffer me at least to love Thee here below." This fearful trial lasted for six weeks, and ended suddenly while he was saying the *Memorare* with great fervor before a statue of the Blessed Virgin, after he had made a vow of chastity and a promise to say his Rosary every day.

From Paris, after a few months' stay at home, Francis went to Padua. There, under the immediate direction of the great Possevin and with the help of the most illustrious masters in the world, he completed his seventeen years of education. His extraordinary talents, his judgment, imagination, and taste were developed and refined to the utmost. In conferring on him at last the degrees of Doctor in Canon and in Civil Law, Pancirolo, the great jurist, declared that the famous university had never bestowed them on a graduate who had better deserved them. During these four years, Francis's love of God increased by continual exercise. His spiritual life may be seen in *Spiritual Combat* (which he always carried with him), in exact practice, and in the rules of conduct he drew up for himself. He was obedient as a child—gentle, humble, and simple, like a fervent religious. Yet, in his sweetness, there was no lack of strength. His consistency in self-mastery required a supernatural fortitude. Vice was rampant in that university town but could not lift its head in his presence without courageous and scathing rebuke. In one of the trials to which his good looks exposed him, he turned out of his house a so-called friend who had made himself the bearer of infamous proposals. On another occasion, when attacked by some young bullies, he drew his sword and quickly put them to flight.

FROM UNIVERSITY TO PRIESTHOOD (1591 - 1593)

After his brilliant success at Padua, Francis sought rest from his labors and refreshment for his spirit in lovely Italy. During some six months, he visited many towns of holy memory, including Loreto and, of course, Rome, where he stayed for some time.

On his return to Savoy, he took up his abode with his parents, who were then living at La Thuille, near Annecy. He was now twenty-five years of age. His father and mother were

delighted with both his personal appearance and the magnificent promise that his fine qualities gave for the future. Monsieur de Boisy granted him the estate of Villaroget, and Francis bore the title of Baron de Villaroget until he became Provost of Geneva. For eighteen months, he led, at least outwardly, the ordinary life of a young noble.

That he should one day be a lawyer and a senator and make a brilliant marriage were among Monsieur de Boisy's designs for his son, but Francis had very different and nobler ideas of greatness. He confided to his mother and to his cousin Canon Louis de Sales his unalterable determination to dedicate himself to God in the priestly state. How to obtain his father's consent he knew not, but his cousin got over the difficulty by procuring for him without his knowledge the provost position within the Chapter of Geneva, which happened to fall vacant at that time. This dignity made the disappointment less grievous to the father, and Francis instantly accepted it as the only way to obtain his desire. He was installed Provost at Annecy, the place of residence of the exiled bishop and Chapter of Geneva, and shortly after received the sub-diaconate. The bishop insisted that he should at once begin to preach. He showed all the virtues of a perfect ecclesiastic and, amongst other works of zeal, founded the great Confraternity of the Cross of Mary Immaculate and Saints Peter and Paul to better combat heresy and to make reparation to God for the fearful outrages it had offered to His Sacred Majesty. He was ordained on 18 December 1593.

SAINT FRANCIS AS PRIEST: LIFE AT ANNECY (1593 - 1594)

On receiving the Priesthood, Francis gave up as dross and without a moment's consideration, his birthright, his title, and his income. He left it all, and he left it with a joyful heart, "For Thou, O Lord," he said, "hast wonderfully placed me in hope." His hope was that he might go into the lanes and byways, to seek out the forsaken and the sinful, to watch by the bedside of the dying, and in loneliness and poverty to become in deed and truth all to all, that he might gain souls to Christ.

At home, his time was spent in prayer or in the studies suited to his profession. Abroad, his time was spent in works of religion and charity. He preached frequently, not in the formal and unreal style of that day but with evangelical simplicity and earnestness. He had a confessional made close to the door of the church, and there crowded all the poor and afflicted as well as the devout. He received them as a loving shepherd and father, rejoiced over their penitence, mingling his tears with theirs over their sins. He visited the sick, distributed abundant alms, and spread devotion in public and in private.

Meanwhile he was unconsciously preparing himself for higher things. His magnificent powers (his apostolic virtues and zeal) were to have an apostle's field of exercise—the poor lost sheep of the Chablais were waiting for him.

CONVERSION OF THE CHABLAIS (1594 - 1598)

The Chablais is the most northern province of the ancient Duchy of Savoy, running along the south side of the Lake of Geneva and thus bordering on Swiss territory. Sixty years before the time of which we are now speaking the Swiss Calvinists had treacherously seized upon all that part of it which lies west of the Drance and had succeeded in destroying the Catholic religion. Savoy regained Chablais after thirty years, but agreed to allow the practice of the protestant religion only. In 1589, the Swiss seized it again, but Charles Emmanuel, Duke of Savoy, quickly retook it. As he was now free from former obligations, he determined to reestablish the old religion. Protestantism was to be tolerated in only three places and, of these, Thonon, the capital, was not one of those. Charles Emmanuel had scarcely retired when, for the third time, the Swiss overran the unfortunate country. However, after a desultory warfare lasting until 1593, they had to beg for a truce and meantime to surrender the Chablais unconditionally to its rightful sovereign. Force had failed, so the Duke now determined to apply the right means of preaching and persuasion. The Bishop of Geneva was asked to send zealous missionaries, and Francis de Sales, thirsting for souls, volunteered to go, with his cousin, Canon Louis, assisting him at first. It would indeed seem to have been a hopeless enterprise, at least to human eyes. In sixty-five parishes, containing upwards of 25,000 souls, there were scarcely a hundred Catholics. The churches had been stripped or destroyed, altars and bells had been taken away, and there was not a priest in the whole district.

“The people of Berne and Geneva,” writes Francis, “have deterred the people from listening to our sermons, saying the truce is but a truce and that presently Duke and priests will be driven out and heresy will flourish again.” On the other hand, the Duke was so much engaged in various affairs that he seemed to have forgotten the Chablais. Again, after two years’ preaching, Francis wrote to him saying, “The people will not believe we are here by Your Highness’s orders, as nothing is done for us; even the expenses incurred here have not been paid.” Through the frequent changes in their religion, the people had lost all sense of the Faith. “We must take from them the love of the world before we can convert them,” said Francis.

Such was the sterile and ungrateful field of the Saint Francis’ labors. He had scarcely set foot in it before he was assailed by all the forces of evil. He was proclaimed a sorcerer and an emissary of the devil, his life was attempted several times, and a missionary who had preceded him was forced to flee for his life from Thonon. It was in this town that Francis began his preaching, but he found it necessary to return every night to the Fort d’Allinges. Sometimes he made excursions into the country parts, preaching in every village if he could find an audience. Often, he found it impossible to procure either food or shelter; if benighted, he took refuge under overhanging eaves of houses or among the

branches of trees. At last, unable to get a hearing, he began to write out copies of his teaching and send them about from house to house. Thus, he is worthily acclaimed as the patron of Catholic journalists. In this way, he composed his great controversial work, which was published after his death under the title of *Les Controverses*, a powerful and able defense of the Catholic Faith. All the time he continued to display the apostolic virtues—love of God and of souls, tender solicitude, and untiring patience. There was still no visible result, but it was really in this time that the seed was sown that produced such abundance later.

There is not space here to enter into the details of the Chablais mission and how hearts were gradually converted to Catholic doctrine. The first converts had to leave the country but the Duke finally awoke to a sense of his obligations and seconded these noble efforts. He sent for Francis to go to Turin, gave him an allowance, promised to support more missionaries, and authorized him to say Mass in one of the churches of Thonon. This was enough and the people, having now the hope of safety, began to put their convictions into practice. The old traditions of the Faith revived and the churches were repaired or rebuilt.

In October, the Papal Legate, accompanied by the Duke, came to receive the reconciliation of the country and thousands made their recantation in his presence. Such a spectacle of grace and faith had not been seen since the conversion of the nations. Hardly a hundred heretics remained where, four years previously, there had been hardly a hundred Catholics. The glory of this result must be attributed, under God, to the virtues, wisdom, preaching, sufferings, and perseverance of the Apostle of the Chablais.

EPISCOPATE – Part 1 (1599 - 1612)

Francis had scarcely brought the mission of the Chablais to its triumphal close when he was appointed Coadjutor to the venerable Bishop of Geneva, with right of succession. He had long refused this dignity and accepted it only when his superiors told him, if he did not accept it, he would be resisting the manifest will of God. Even when he had accepted the appointment, Francis would not accept episcopal consecration until the time of his actual succession.

His first business was a journey to Rome about religious matters of the diocese. He was accompanied by Monsieur de Chissé, Bishop Granier's nephew, who presented Bishop Granier's letter to the Pope, asking that his Coadjutor should succeed him. The Holy Father was greatly pleased, granted the request at once, and sent word to Francis to get ready for the necessary examination. The Coadjutor humbly asserted the privilege of exemption from examination, claimed by the Savoyard Bishops, but the Holy Father himself examined him, saying he wished not to test but to manifest his knowledge. The

Venerable Juvenal Ancina was present and, going afterwards to congratulate him, embraced him tenderly saying, “Oh how much more do I rejoice today to see you so truly humble, than I did at your examination to see you so truly learned!” At this time, Francis also met Baronius, Bellarmine, and other great men of the Church.

On his return to Savoy, Francis became busy with the affairs of the diocese, particularly temporal matters in the Chablais, and he spent a great part of the year 1602 in Paris in connection with another portion of the diocese of Geneva called Gex. This portion had been taken from Savoy by the Swiss when they usurped the Chablais, but ultimately it came into the possession of France. So charmed was Henry IV with the mild dignity of the prelate from Savoy that he begged Francis to accept the first vacant bishopric in his gift, with the most liberal promises of patronage. However, Francis assured the monarch that he would never forsake his poor spouse, the bishopric of Geneva, for a richer one, and that if he left her it would be to take no other. He preached during Lent at Paris that year with such eloquence and earnestness that the Bishop of Evreux declared, “I can convince heretics, but it is only Monsignor de Genève who can convert them.”

This visit to France (for Savoy was not France) was most important in its influence upon the development of Saint Francis. Though his brilliant intellectual gifts—his charming personality and his evident sanctity—so greatly impressed those whom he met, he received more than he bestowed. Paris was the center of a religious revival. Devotion was, so to say, all the rage amongst fashionable people and a movement of reform was powerful and active. Madame Acarie, afterwards Blessed Mary of the Incarnation, was already regarded as a second Saint Teresa and was in close contact with a large circle of saintly men and women. Her director, Cardinal de Berulle, was the master of saints like John Eudes and Vincent de Paul and profoundly impressed Saint Francis. “He is everything,” said the latter, “which I should desire to be myself.” Amongst those whom he met at this time were the Carthusian Dom Beaucousin, Asseline, Galleman, and Duval, doctors of the Sorbonne and many others. Francis was even an occasional confessor of Madame Acarie herself and, after her death, reproached himself that, through deference and respect, he had not learned more of the secrets of her sanctity.

Moreover, during this period, he worked hard to perfect his literary style. One model he chose was Montaigne, the brilliant essayist who now had been dead ten years.

It is noteworthy that upon his return from France, Francis appeared to have gained the full maturity of his powers. He now began to write those wonderful letters of direction that, charming in themselves, are still more important as the foundation of his later works.

Upon his arrival at Lyons on his homeward journey, he learnt of the death of Monsignor Granier, and hastened home to prepare himself for consecration as his successor. At

Thonon in the Chablais, now through his apostolic labors restored to the Catholic Faith, he received, on 8 December 1602, the fullness of the priesthood. He confessed afterwards that during the ceremony he received wonderful graces from God. “God,” he said, “took me from myself at that moment and gave me to my people that I might no longer live except for Him and for them.”

PRIVATE LIFE AND HOUSEHOLD

Before his consecration, he made a retreat of twenty days during which he drew up a rule of life for himself. In accordance with that rule, he had his house arranged like a monastery with fixed hours and rules. The rooms for his household and for visitors were large and well furnished but his own bedroom or cell was a small, dingy, ill-furnished closet. “I must be the Bishop of Geneva by day,” he said, “but I shall be Francis de Sales by night.” He rose early, and gave an hour to prayer and two hours to study before saying Mass. After Mass, when he was home, almost the entire remainder of the day was taken up with the affairs of the diocese and of those who came to consult him. He was accessible to all—not only to his officials or to persons with important business, but also to the most ordinary visitors, rich or poor, persons to whom many would have considered it a waste of time to speak. As his wisdom and impartiality became better known, it began to be a custom to take lawsuits before him; one witness at his canonization deposed that he had assisted at over a hundred of such pleadings. Not only did the parties themselves appear, but they also brought their legal advisers with them and temporarily turned Francis’s room into a noisy law court. Francis alone preserved an imperturbable peace. After a day of such wearisome and often wasted labor, he would return to his own work with as much calm as if he had been engaged in only congenial and successful undertakings. He had an enormous amount of correspondence, but never employed a secretary lest his correspondents should feel less confidence in him. However, it was to spiritual business that he most willingly devoted his time, particularly to hearing confessions. This he would do at any hour, even taking off his vestments when ready for Mass to hear the most casual of penitents.

As Provost, Francis had received and invited to come to him the worst of sinners and the lowest of people. Now, as Bishop, he claimed them, particularly those whose sores and other bodily infirmities made them more repulsive. He gave public alms twice a week and no one was sent away unrelieved. When he had exhausted his purse, he would give away his clothes. His chief anxiety was to escape the notice of his much harassed and often impatient steward.

He also urged upon his clergy the observance and rules of the Council of Trent as to clerical dress, church services, registers and the like, and of his own regulations regarding

public catechism and instruction of the people. He appointed special acts of reparation on Thursdays for the insults offered to the Blessed Sacrament by the heretics of his diocese. Throughout his life, he labored for the reform and the reestablishment of various religious orders and houses, a work in which he met many disappointments and some signal successes. The French part of his diocese was increased by the action of the French Government, which arose chiefly from a certain jealousy between France and Savoy at this time. Refusals for permission to visit or preach there and delays in answering his communications often caused him wearying anxiety and waste of time.

The Bishop's next great and special work was the personal visitation of every parish in his diocese. He visited every place where men could live. The high mountains of Savoy and Mont Blanc itself are in the ancient diocese of Geneva and this devoted shepherd often traveled on bleeding hands and knees, his feet a mass of wounds, and sometimes in a state of high fever caused by his violent exertions in climbing the heights. At night, he was so weary that he could not move mind or body. He fed his own soul on the glorious spectacle of nature in those regions and on the virtues and affections he found among the simple mountaineers. Everywhere he corrected the abuses and renewed religious fervor, visited the sick and dying, reconciled enemies, and delivered the possessed.

Yet, in the midst of such engrossing labors, he maintained the closest union with God. Asked once whether he ever forgot God's presence, he replied humbly, "Yes, sometimes, for a quarter of an hour!"

It was when he was preaching the Lenten sermons at Dijon in 1604 that he became acquainted with the Baroness de Chantal, afterwards Saint Jane de Chantal.

She had prayed earnestly to God to send her a trustworthy guide and had seen the form of a man in a vision, whom she recognized afterwards as Saint Francis. On his side, he could not fail to notice the handsome, well-dressed young widow who drew up her chair near to his pulpit. He inquired about her and made her acquaintance. It was a momentous meeting for both of them.

She had been under obedience to an unwise director who made things worse by extracting from her a promise not to apply for spiritual help to anyone but himself. Saint Francis set her free from her scruples and guided her in that broad, large, and generous way of liberty that was characteristic of him.

Madame de Chantal's servants remarked that, "Madame's old confessor had bidden her say her prayers three times a day and soon they were all tired of it, but the new one [meaning the Bishop] made her pray all day long and no one was put out." Francis cultivated the undisturbed growth of the soul in undisturbed peace—a peace far removed from idleness and consisting in the despising rather than dreading of temptation. Thus, his spiritual children might go on their way without self-torture or morbid introspection.

Most of Saint Francis's direction of the future Saint Jane Frances was effected by letter. The letters that survive are a precious revelation of the holiness of these two elect souls and of the love that united them. Saint Francis writes tenderly, courteously, and affectionately. It was in his nature so to do and he won souls to God thereby. However, he is able to criticize himself. "There are no souls in the world, as I think," he writes to Saint Jane Frances, "who love more cordially, tenderly, and (to speak in all sincerity) more lovingly than I. I even abound in affectionateness and words thereof, particularly at the beginning, for it has pleased God to make my heart so. Still I like souls that are independent, vigorous, and not feminine for such great tenderness disturbs the heart, disquiets it, distracts it, and so forth."

Nor is it only to Saint Jane Frances that he writes affectionately. "The names of father and daughter are more Christian, more sweet, and of greater force to testify the sacred love that Our Lord has willed to be between us. Live all for God, my dear daughter, and often recommend to His goodness the soul of him who, with an invariable affection, is entirely dedicated to yours." All this is written, not to Saint Jane Frances, but to that poor spoiled saint, Angelique Arnauld.

Yet, his tenderness was no hindrance to his complete detachment. "I am the most affectionate person in the world," he writes, "and yet I think that I love nothing but God and the souls of all creatures for God." He often said to Saint Jane Frances that, when he was not in their presence, he could not say what his friends looked like!

"He was detached," she afterwards wrote, "from life and death, from relatives and friends. His spirit triumphed over all that. Such was his greatness of soul."

Moreover, if he was always courteous and affectionate, he did not spare his rebukes when needed. At the beginning of his acquaintance with Madame de Chantal, he had something to say of her dress. "Madame, if you did not wear this lace, would you cease to be well-dressed?" Once he asked her if she intended to remarry and, when she hastened to repudiate the idea, he bade her "lower her flag." On another occasion when a woman who visited him was somewhat too *décolletée*, with a smile he offered her a packet of pins. In his letters to Mother de Chastel, he writes, "There are two women in you—the one, like Saint Peter at first, is a little touchy, sensitive, ready to be put out, and vexed when she is contradicted. She is a daughter of Eve and therefore of ill humor. The other has a very good will to be all God's and, in order to be all God's, to be very simply humble and sweet towards all her neighbors. She is a daughter of the glorious Virgin Mary and consequently of good affection." The Saint goes on to develop this thought; the bad one is perverse, overbearing, and struggles against the good one. The good one must not be discouraged, as she will gain the victory in the end. Who could take offense at rebukes so charmingly administered?

The letters are still delightful and helpful to read, best of all in their somewhat quaint old French.

The Saint's best-known book, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, was largely a collection of the letters of direction he had written to a certain Madame de Charmoisy. It was first published in 1608 and can be called epoch-making for it taught that all are called to perfection, even those who live "in the world," a teaching that was not by any means universally recognized. We must not forget that, in his terminology, "devotion" is equivalent to perfection and perfection is (also according to the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas) equivalent to perfect love of God. He wished those living the devout life in the world to be well dressed, attractive, and, in a word, a good advertisement for "le bon Dieu." He even allowed them to dance, whereat some "pious" hands were lifted in horror! A characteristic of this, as well as of his other writings, is his use of examples from natural history. He draws much of this material from Pliny, and whether his bees and doves are real or fabulous, they give charm and vivid illustration to his books.

ORDER OF THE VISITATION (1610 - 1612)

For some years after their first introduction, Saint Francis and Madame de Chantal rarely met. Traveling was not easy and Dijon is far from Annecy. Saint Jane Frances was often a visitor to the Carmelites at Dijon. In her letters to her director, she discussed the lessons she learned there. It is quite clear from their correspondence that the two saints advanced together in the spiritual life and that the Bishop of Geneva not only taught much, but he also learned much.

After long hesitation, he sent for Saint Jane Frances and disclosed to her the conclusions at which he had slowly arrived concerning her future. Finding her ready to accept whatever he decided, he told her of his project for a new order for women. It was to prescribe no severe bodily austerities, for he wished to admit not only the young and robust, but also older women, widows and others, who had been accustomed to the refinements of life and who by delicate health would be precluded from entering existing orders. For exterior mortification, they were to substitute the mortification of the will and the affections. No one who reads in Saint Francis's letters the complete self-abnegation, which he teaches will ever be under any delusion as to the strength and vigor of his direction. *Suaviter in modo*—yes, unfailingly—but *fortiter in re*.

The other aim of our Saint was to allow his religious, even after their profession, to combine the active with the contemplative life, to go out to visit the sick and to do other works outside their convent. It was for this reason that he gave to his foundation the title of the Visitation. However, prejudices at the time were too strong for him. Nuns, it was generally considered, should be under strict enclosure. In deference to the wishes of

Cardinal de Marquemont, Archbishop of Lyons, on the occasion of the foundation of a house of the Visitation in that city, Saint Francis agreed to alter his plan and the sisters of the Visitation became the enclosed order that we know today.

It was left to a later date for Saint Vincent de Paul to give non-cloistered religious to the Church with his Sisters of Charity. The Visitation was founded on 6 June 1610.

Madame de Chantal and two others were the first members and were soon joined by others. Saint Francis provided them with conferences on the spiritual life and the ways of prayer, many of which are still preserved. His direction of these holy women resulted in the writing of his masterpiece, *Treatise on the Love of God*, a work that mirrors the full development of his own mystical initiation. After all, mysticism is but the love of God. There is nothing higher.

This treatise cost him every moment of the years 1616 and 1617, and he said that for a few lines of it he had sometimes read twelve hundred folio pages, among others of Saint Thomas, Saint Bonaventure, Denis the Carthusian, Louis of Granada, Cardinal Bellarmine, Saint Teresa, Saint Catherine of Siena, and Saint Catherine of Genoa.

EPISCOPATE – Part 2 (1612 - 1622)

Anxious eyes now noticed a change in the beloved Bishop. He was in the prime of life regarding age, but he had filled a long time with his incessant, self-forgetful toil. At the suggestion of the Duke of Savoy, the Saint's brother was chosen by the Pope as his Coadjutor, and John Francis de Sales was consecrated Bishop of Chalcedon in 1618.

The mind of Francis now seemed to be turned more and more towards passage to eternity. In a letter written on the eve of the Assumption of Our Lady, he says, "I was meditating this evening on this Queen, dying of a fever sweeter than all health. I mean the fever of love that sets her heart on fire in such sort that she breathes forth her holy soul, which goes straight to the arms of her Blessed Son. Ah! How fair is the dawn of the eternal day!"

The Cardinal of Savoy now desired that the Bishop should accompany him to Paris to assist in arranging the treaty of marriage between Christina of France, sister of Louis XIII, and the Prince of Piedmont. Every moment of his stay in Paris cost him dear, owing to the eagerness of the clergy and nobility to profit by his stay among them. Three more years passed in comparative tranquility, and the quiet patience of Francis hid his almost constant suffering. Great hopes were entertained that he might yet be spared to the world for many years. Alas, these hopes were not to be realized. Once again, the Bishop was urged to accompany the Duke of Savoy to Avignon to meet the French King, with whom the Duke was there to have an interview.

The day Francis was to leave Annecy, he went to the convent that had been his constant care for ten years. He said his Mass there for the last time. When it was finished, he gave a short instruction to the Sisters on his favorite motto, "Ask for nothing and refuse nothing." Then he said, "Goodbye, my children, until eternity." The Sisters threw themselves weeping at his feet, exclaiming, "May God brings you back soon." "And if it pleased Him not to bring me back," he replied, "would He be less lovable?"

On 25 November, the two Sovereigns left Avignon for Lyons, and the holy Bishop had to follow the Court of Savoy, in spite of his dislike of grandeur and his ever-increasing infirmities. Except for the change in his appearance, no one would suspect how much he suffered. His face shone with sanctity, and even the Calvinists who heard his words shared the general veneration and enthusiasm of the Catholics. "Ah," they cried out, "If all the bishops were like this we should all soon be Catholics!"

They spoke truly, and the immense success of Saint Francis in the conversion of heretics is a striking proof of their words, for it is said that he converted over seventy thousand people.

On his arrival at Lyons, the Bishop refused all invitations to stay in magnificent houses. He had already engaged a small room in the gardener's cottage at the Visitation Convent where he could be free to do as he liked. He spent much of his time at the convent discoursing upon things of eternity with his dear daughters of the Visitation. Mother de Chantal, who had been visiting various newly founded houses of the Order, had not seen the Bishop for over three years. She had arranged to meet him at Lyons, for there were many personal things about which she wished to consult him, as well as those relating to the Order, and she had written them all down. They had to wait some time before they could meet, for the Bishop's time was much taken up by the king and the Duke. When at last he came to the convent, he said at once, "Let us finish the affairs of our little congregation. Ah! How much I love it, for I think that God is well served in it." They therefore continued for four hours to arrange the affairs of the Order and then it was time for him to leave. Mother de Chantal never saw him again. She had to go to Grenoble in the freezing days of December to visit the convent there and the moment was coming when this great servant of God was to be rewarded for all his labors.

During the days preceding Christmas, Francis preached wherever he was asked. When, on the feast itself, he said midnight Mass at the Visitation Convent, Mother de Blonay, the Superior, saw an angel standing by his side. He went thence to hear the confession of the Prince and Princess of Piedmont, for whom he said his second Mass, and then returned to the convent for his third. The next day, 26 December, after a day of work and fatigue, he came to the convent very late and gave the sisters a Conference on Divine

Love and the duties of religious life. He stayed there until his servants came with torches to conduct him to his little room in the cottage. He then blessed all the sisters, reminding them, as he had done at Annecy, to “Ask for nothing and refuse nothing.”

On the 27th, the feast of Saint John, Francis rose and, feeling that his sight was failing, thanked God for the weakness that was weighing him down. He then went to confession and said Mass. After Mass came interviews with the Duke de Nemours, the Duke of Bellegarde, Governor of Burgundy, and many others. Francis had intended to leave Lyons that day but, upon his return to the cottage, his attendants besought him to postpone his departure until the next. About two o'clock in the afternoon he fell down in a faint and half-an-hour afterwards was struck with apoplexy and paralysis; but he quickly recovered consciousness and speech. In those days, the remedies for these diseases were terribly cruel, including even burning the head with hot irons to prevent lethargy. Saint Francis bore all with perfect patience, without murmur or complaint, though tears were running down his cheeks. He saw and blessed the numerous visitors who crowded into the room; among them was Jean Jacques Olier, of whom Francis foretold the future sanctity and work for God and the Church. Shortly before eight in the evening, those at the bedside, seeing the end had come, began the prayers for the dying. At the moment they repeated the invocation *Omnes sancti Innocentes, orate pro eo* for the third time, he gently gave his last sigh and slept in the peace of Our Lord. It was the feast of the Holy Innocents, 28 December 1622.

He is buried in the church at Annecy by the side of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal.



“Do not wish to be anything but what you are, and try to be that perfectly.”

“Every one of us needs half an hour of prayer each day, except when busy—then we need an hour.”

“We shall steer safely through every storm so long as our heart is right, our intention fervent, our courage steadfast, and our trust fixed on God.”

“It is not always in your power to do important things; sufficient are the small things that offer themselves every hour of the day. So do them with devotion and love.”



This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

**8528 Kenosha Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

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